

# THE PRINCIPAL'S ACADEMY: A COLLABORATIVE CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE ON CONGRUENCE OF PRINCIPAL TRAINING TO URBAN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

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## Abstract

Purposively selected urban California superintendents and assistant superintendents participated in surveys and interviews which examined their views about the impact California university Tier I school leadership preparation programs have on overall preparedness for the position, effectiveness of job performance, longevity, transference of skills gained to professional staff development within the school site, and student achievement within their districts. Superintendents reported that Tier I candidates are academically well prepared for overall school leadership and candidates emerge with strong instructional leadership and management skills. It was recommended by superintendents that The Principal's Academy teach aspiring administrators to be courageous, relational, and know self, to optimally meet the demands of urban school administration. Superintendents recommended field experience enhancement through collaboratively designed internships with real data and prescribed site-based experiences.

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Keyword: The Principal's Academy—A multi-university overview of private, CSU, and UC school leadership preparation programs, which graduate current and future educational administrators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of effective school leaders in California.

## Introduction

This study addresses California urban school district administrators' perceptions of university training programs for educational leaders. Research and literature examining administrative education programs historically express the tension between academic coursework in the universities and the practical experiences of on-the-job training. Thus, this study raised the question "How well are universities preparing the leaders of our schools?" and asked district urban school superintendents and assistant superintendents to respond.

Legislation at the national and state levels calls for highly qualified principals in all schools (CDE, 2001; The No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Research supports this call with studies arguing for the critical need for effective site-based *leaders* in our schools (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; Fullan 2006; Goodlad, 1999; Neuhaus, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2007; Nelson, 1989). "Schools can't get better without better principals, and you can't put a reform into place if the principal doesn't promote it. Principals need to first be educators rather than business managers and administrators" (Grubb, 2000, as cited by Maclay, 2000, p. 2).

Across the United States, 31% of the U.S. student population attends schools in only 1.5% of the school districts (Ladd, 2007). These school districts may be described as highly populated, densely concentrated urban school districts. California corners a large share of the national concentration of students in urban school settings. Los Angeles County in Southern California is home to one-third the population of the state. This county includes Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that commands the position as the second largest school district in the nation, enrolling 727,000 students, and Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), enrolling 98,000 students. Orange County, directly south of Los Angeles County, also contains several large urban school districts. Other large urban areas in California include San Francisco, San Diego, Fresno, and San Bernardino.

Within those districts designated as urban, certain challenges require unique knowledge and skills of a new site administrator. These challenges include higher than average proportions of students in poverty, students whose parents have acquired limited formal education, immigrants and other students with limited English skills, students from unstable or changing family structures, higher than the national average rate of student mobility, shortage of qualified teachers, more teachers with emergency credentials, teachers required to teach outside of their fields of expertise, aging facilities, and lower than state average of academic achievement (Weiss, 2004).

With such challenges facing entering principals, faculty of principal training programs across the state of California joined together for this research study. Their purpose was to examine urban district administrators' perceptions of their product – namely Tier I program graduates. California requires that persons desiring to be certified as a principal enter a Tier I program. This program certifies that a graduate may apply for entering administrative positions,

such as Assistant Principal. This faculty asked: How well *are* California's university principal preparation programs producing the leading educators for the challenges of our urban districts? And what do top level district administrators perceive that faculty do or do not provide so that their future school leaders are graduating with the foundational mindset required to be successful in urban settings?

## Supporting Literature

The extent to which principals exhibit leadership responsibilities correlates significantly to student academic achievement (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005). Categorized into 21 identifiable behaviors, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty defined these responsibilities as: affirmation; change agent; contingent rewards; communication; culture; discipline; flexibility; focus; ideals/beliefs; input; intellectual stimulation; involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; monitoring and evaluating; optimizer; order; outreach; relationships; resources; situational awareness; and visibility. In their work, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty likened these responsibilities, as they related to accountability, to “transactional leadership” by Collins (2001) in his research findings on businesses that have gone from “good to great.” If the enemy of greatness is a simple and formidable satisfaction with just being good at what we do (Collins, 2001), how good is good enough, when we examine our schools through the lens of accountability, and particularly, our principals who lead them?

In a summary of research on leadership accountability, Lashway (2001) frames the issue as, “For many, ‘accountability’ just means delivering results” (p.2). He adds, “In this era of standards, accountability should encompass consequences, both positive and negative, that are based on results” (as cited in Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005, p. 44). Can this delivery of results be aligned to effective traits exhibited by today's school leaders?

The study reported here examined urban executive school leaders' views about the effects of The Principal's Academy on improving the quality of education at the school level within their districts. The research team concentrated specifically on twelve of California's largest districts with 50,000 students or more enrolled, to address the unique challenges these districts face as they seek to positively impact and benefit learning for all children within their boundaries. In contrast to Hess & Kelly (2007), who examined the content of instruction through a stratified sample of the nation's principal-preparation programs, including the programs training the most candidates, the programs regarded as the most prestigious and more typical programs, and who found that just 2% of course weeks across 56 principal preparation programs addressed accountability, we focused our investigation on California as we sought to compare the findings within the literature, to the perceptions of inner city P-12 superintendents and assistant superintendents in twelve greater metropolitan school districts across the state.

## Method

### Participants and Settings

Participants in this study consisted of two purposively selected groups: 1) The research team of fifteen faculty participants, program directors, and/or department chairs across nine

public and private university administrative credential programs; and 2) twelve, P-12 urban California superintendents, and/or assistant superintendents, of public instruction who lead most of California's largest urban districts. "Purposive sampling is most often used in qualitative research to select individuals or behaviors that will better inform the researcher regarding the current focus of the investigation" (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 172). Faculty participants examined program data reported within their own respective institutional self-studies, reports prepared for accreditation purposes, and data collected within research studies conducted by faculty members within their institution's school leadership programs.

Faculty participants were then teamed into selected areas of interest for completion of tasks as outlined in the research project parameters. A task team for the design of an online questionnaire created and delivered an initial web-based questionnaire to superintendents of twelve urban California districts to sample their views regarding The Principal's Academy as aligned to the research questions. The survey instrument was designed to include categories aligned to the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSELs).

Data from the online questionnaires were categorized into themes and coded to generate the creation of an interview protocol. Task team members were subsequently invited to conduct in-district interviews with superintendents, and/or their designees, of the twelve districts which were selected as the largest urban districts in California. The twelve purposively selected districts represent 100% of such districts in California, with over 50,000 enrolled average daily attendance (ADA), comprising 25% of the 6,252,031 total enrolled students in the state.

Urban superintendent and/or executive cabinet member views were analyzed for the impact university principal preparation programs have on overall preparedness for the position, effectiveness of job performance, longevity, transference of skills gained to professional staff development within the school site, and student achievement within their districts. Demographic information for the twelve participating districts represents the considerable variability of characteristics among and between California's largest urban school districts as shown in Table 1.

## Procedures

A cover letter, the interview protocol, and a sample of the online survey instrument including the hyperlink address, were mailed to each respondent during the month of October 2008. The cover letter indicated that a faculty team across nine universities were conducting a survey to gather information on their views about the identified effects California university Tier I school leadership preparation programs have on overall preparedness for the position, effectiveness of job performance, longevity, transference of skills gained to professional staff development within the school site, and student achievement within their districts. Although a small number of principals from each district may not have attended a Tier I preparation program, the research team determined it would be impossible for the superintendent to know which principals had not attended such a program. A follow-up phone call to each superintendent was made to confirm their participation in the study. One-hundred percent of the twelve urban superintendents and/or their designees agreed to participate.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Position		
Superintendent	5	42
Assistant Superintendent	7	58
Gender		
Male	5	42
Female	7	58
Length of Service in Executive Leadership Position		
3-5 years	3	25
6-9 years	5	42
10-15 years	3	25
20+ years	1	8
Location		
Northern California	1	8
Central California	3	25
Southern California	8	68
Size of District (by student enrollment)		
50,000	6	50
50,000-75,000	3	25
75,000-100,000	1	8
100,000-500,000	1	8
500,000 or higher	1	8

**Data Sources and Analyses**

This study was conducted using a qualitative method approach. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research ~~implies~~ implies a direct concern with experience as it is lived or felt or undergone ” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p.7).

The primary data analyzed for this study were: 1) program data reported within nine California university principal leadership program self-studies, institutional reports prepared for accreditation purposes, and data collected within research studies conducted by faculty members within each institution’s school leadership programs; 2) an online questionnaire, and 3) responses to open-ended, in-district interviews with superintendents of twelve large, urban California school districts.

Inductive analysis was utilized to examine participants’ responses to the interviews. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to ensure completeness of data. Although content was analyzed qualitatively for themes and recurring patterns of meaning, content analysis was also used as a ~~quantitatively~~ quantitatively oriented technique by which standard

measurements are applied to metrically define units and these are used to characterize and compare documents” (Manning & Cullum-Swan 1994, p. 464). The units of measurement in this form of content analysis centered on communication, especially the frequency and variety of messages. In its adoption for use in this qualitative study, the communication of meaning was the focus. Analysis was inductive, although categories and variables initially guided the study, “Others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). The process involved the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that captured relevant characteristics of the document’s content. As categories emerged they were coded through the constant comparative method of data analysis which captured recurring patterns that cut across “the preponderance” of data (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 139). The coding and labeling of text according to content provided a means for theory building (Richards & Richards, 1994). This was repeated using the grounded theory approach until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin 1990). This method of analysis involved the identification of interpretive themes and categories that emerged from the data (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). The inductive analysis process began with the research team’s thorough reading of each interview transcript to gain a sense of the range of the responses and identify any reoccurring themes. Tentative themes were then refined after the research team collaboratively reread, reflected on, and discussed each of the participants’ responses. Validity and reliability was achieved through participation of at least two or more other members of the research team in the coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This study was collaboratively undertaken across nine California State University, University of California, and private university Tier I programs. It was the desire of these fifteen faculty members, to better understand the congruence of what we say we do in producing the school leaders who administer our urban schools in California, to the views of twelve urban superintendents and/or their designees in California’s largest metropolitan districts.

## Results

While many of the study respondents provided similar responses, this section provides some of the more specific responses to the research protocol. How prepared are the graduates of California’s private, State University, and University of California’s school leadership preparation programs with regard to: overall preparedness for the position; effectiveness of job performance; longevity; transference of knowledge and skills to school leadership; dispositions for school leadership; providing professional staff development within the school site; increasing student achievement within your district?

Superintendents and assistant superintendents reported five general areas of congruence between their current urban school leadership needs and the preparation of Tier I candidates in California. They included: (a) Tier I candidates are academically well prepared for overall school leadership, (b) The broad strokes of the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSELs) are being addressed, (c) Candidates emerge with strong instructional leadership skills, (d) Candidates are gaining good management skills, (e) Good basic policy procedures and detail protocols are being learned. Five identified missing elements reported by urban superintendents and/or their executive cabinet members for overall preparedness for the position of school leadership. They were: (a) Not necessarily prepared for urban settings, (b) “Thinking” about systems, (c) Know theory, but don’t understand application to systems, (d)

Lack of understanding of leadership influence, (e) Learned experiences are key before they actually enter the job. One superintendent noted:

*New leaders come to us prepared with the necessary knowledge, but need to be immersed in the content of being an instructional leader. Most of our leaders were teacher leaders so they have experience working as leaders at their sites. It is critical that they have on-the-job leadership experiences not just theoretical knowledge.*

Within effectiveness of job performance, superintendents and assistant superintendents reported quality school leadership is being taught in the university systems, and that effective leadership is about making people feel good about what they do everyday. It was noted from an HR standpoint, they need two basic understandings: the importance of staffing, and operating well within the collective bargaining unit agreement. One urban assistant superintendent of human resources reported:

*From an HR point of view, what we see our new administrators need are two things: getting them to realize how important staffing is, and dealing with the contract. Not looking at the Collective Bargaining contract as a barrier but from the standpoint of how am I going to operate within that agreement to get done what I need to get done?*

Superintendents and assistant superintendents reported that longevity has less to do with university preparation than it does with personality and/or traits of personal and professional character. *“Longevity has to do with the calling to be both a teacher and a principal. Longevity is in response to that calling.”* Participants noted that longevity also has to do with the school site. One respondent stated, *“New principals who are in a challenging role, we predict, won’t last.”* Another superintendent noted, *“New principals can be overwhelmed by trying to perform in a role they don’t have control over. They romanticize the position. It’s not just about getting dressed up and attending a meeting or two.”* Participants reported a clear theme: 1) that new principals remain longer in less challenging roles; and 2) longevity depends on how frustrating their particular leadership position is. *“If they grow, they stay with you over time.”* A missing element reported by urban superintendents and/or their executive cabinet members for longevity in school leadership was that they need mentors in the field.

For transference of knowledge and skills to school leadership, superintendents and assistant superintendents reported three areas of congruence between the preparation of Tier I candidates in California and their current urban school leadership needs. They included: (a) Knowledgeable about what to do, not always how to do it, (b) On-site experience is helpful for a deeper understanding of school leadership, (c) There is not an exact fit for all districts as they have varying needs. Three identified missing elements were noted: (a) Add a collaborative piece to the Tier I programs, (b) Need ability to assess culture and climate and know the difference, (c) Courses are broad and spend time on foundational content, when real life scenarios are needed. For example, one respondent noted:

*It’s one thing to understand how school finance is done, but quite another to understand how to work within different budgets to make budget decisions that*

*affect site councils and leadership teams. It's one thing to understand how school finance is done from the state... it's another thing to make decisions for which your site councils and your leadership teams are impacted.*

Addressing professional staff development within the school site, superintendents and assistant superintendents reported that although candidates emerge from California's Tier I programs prepared *overall* for school leadership, they are not necessarily prepared to tackle professional growth for their staff. One respondent noted, *"Professional staff development is very specific to the district and/or school site and can't be taught at the university."* Another participant stated, *"Principals must understand they have different positions that help them move and implement a district initiative that may not be the one the staff wants to follow."* Additionally, *"Principals can't lead and influence if they don't understand their role as an instructional leader."*

Two identified missing elements were reported as: (a) Not prepared with knowledge and practice of facilitation skills, (b) Need to know how to prioritize.

One respondent noted:

*Our schools have leadership teams to plan and implement PD for sites. However, new leaders do not have the facilitation skills, nor understand the capability they have to influence the group. They don't have to mandate or be autocratic. They need to know how to work with the group. This is a skill to be developed over time and they don't come out of programs with this ready to go.*

For increasing student achievement, superintendents and assistant superintendents reported in general that they get the data piece, but one size does not fit all. A respondent stated, *"One type of intervention is far from the truth, in that our higher achieving students aren't being serviced either."* Another noted:

*It takes time to focus on increasing instructional strategies to increase student achievement and this can't be done in a university program. They come out of the programs with really good knowledge about data, but not necessarily how to collaborate with their staff on next steps.*

Two identified missing elements were reported as: (a) Need on-site, hands-on learning, (b) Interventions should be aligned to issues.

### Discussion, Summary, and Conclusions

In this study, we examined the congruence of Tier I school leadership preparation programs in California to the perceptions of superintendents and their cabinet members in twelve of California's largest urban school districts. Each of these executives lead organizations ranging in enrollments from fifty thousand to over seven hundred thousand students. Relying on their school level leaders to succeed in every area of their duties and responsibilities to the community is foremost on these executives' agendas, particularly as schools and school systems are under increasing pressure to perform (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).



The personal, individual calling of teachers, school counselors, psychologists, and other school personnel to enter university principal leadership programs provides the impetus for these emerging leaders to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to step outside of their classrooms and offices to begin to learn how to lead their schools with the *mindset* of a school leader. This mindset is germane to the foundation of the school leader in every aspect of their position, particularly for executive decision making, planning, data analysis, understanding the groups they lead, conflict management and resolution, the legal landscape within which they are required to operate, the policies and politics of California's legislative branch as related to local educational agencies, and of particular importance, the design of substantive change strategies which increase and sustain achievement for all students through the effective supervision of curriculum and instruction within their schools.

From the collaborative partnerships between urban districts and their local university school leadership faculty, comes a twofold benefit for local communities: 1) the reciprocity of universities understanding and valuing the most up-to-date current and emerging urban school district leadership needs; and 2) the research-based design, delivery and supervision of sound, conceptually well framed programs that measure through student learning outcomes, the most recent knowledge, skills, *and* dispositions that frame the *mindset* required to lead schools effectively.

What would a university P-12 school leadership preparation program encompass if it maximized and empowered all of the best practices educational leadership faculty members, program directors, and department chairpersons collectively and collaboratively designed across all three university systems in California? Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) note, "Specific behaviors and characteristics associated with being a responsible leader are: consciously challenging the status-quo; being willing to lead change initiatives with uncertain outcomes; systematically considering new and better ways of doing things; and consistently attempting to operate at the edge versus the center of the school's competence" (p. 45). These knowledge sets, skills, and dispositions are precisely what superintendents of public instruction are looking for in their principals. Determining the congruence of The Principal's Academy to the perceptions of these superintendents appreciably strengthens educational leadership preparation programs within California to ensure we are preparing school leaders for the challenges of their positions, particularly in urban settings.

There exists a preponderance of literature (Fullan, 2006; Goodlad, 1999; Sergiovanni, 2007; Elmore, 2004; Terry, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007), that defends the view that there are, in fact, several common and overlapping characteristics in successful and effective principals. At no time in recent memory has the need for effective and inspired leadership been more pressing than it is today. "With increasing needs in our society and in the workplace for knowledgeable, skilled, responsible citizens, the pressure on schools intensifies. The expectation that no child be left behind in a world and in an economy that will require everyone's best, is not likely to subside" (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 123).

How well *are* California's university principal preparation programs producing leading educators for the challenges of our urban districts. Although candidate data collection instruments vary from one university program to the next, reflective discussions among the participating researchers regarding program candidate data indicate strong candidate similarities.

Candidates generally have strong academic backgrounds upon entering principal preparation programs, and candidates tend to improve their measured leadership dispositions from the beginning of the programs to completion. The researchers for this study agree that the data are generally representative of candidates in each of the universities participating in the research for this study.

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